Rhodesia Revisited

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I recently had the opportunity to view an old CBS news documentary with the benefit of some personal experience on the subject and almost thirty years historical context. *Who's Got a Right to Rhodesia*, by Irv Drasnin, was originally aired in 1976 and was filmed near the peak of hostilities in the war that eventually led to the creation an independent Zimbabwe. Drasnin's film is a rather /straightforward, journalistic account of the political situation in Rhodesia at the time consisting of interviews with many Rhodesians including but not limited to: then president Ian Smith, his successor and current Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe, Joshua Nkomo and other prominent black nationalist leaders, selected young blacks on the streets, whites on the farms and even a few white liberal dissidents. Voice-over narration provides insight, facts, and statistics that effectively illustrate the dramatic differences between the political freedoms and standards of living for blacks and whites.

I had a particular interest in seeing this film because my family comes from Rhodesia, the first of my ancestors arriving at the Cape of Good Hope in the 17th century. When *Who's Got a Right to Rhodesia* was filmed my father had already been in America for a decade but our family visited the remaining Rhodesian relatives in the seventies. By the end of the seventies the entire extended family had come to America. I was too young to remember much of Africa, but I grew up hearing about it. I heard adventure stories of encounters with dangerous animals. I heard wistful reminiscences of the beauty of the countryside. I heard my granny's racist anecdotes and paternalistic rants about the "white man's burden." But, I also heard loving stories about black servants, and reasoned accounts of the complexities of colonialism and the difficulties involved in its dissolution. I wanted to see this film in order to see the country as it was when I visited as a child and to try to place my family and it's collective narrative within the context of the greater political and social situation as seen by an "objective" outsider.

While of course it's impossible to be purely objective, Drasnin made a film that is fundamentally fair and an accurate portrayal of the political conflict in Rhodesia at that time. He presents both sides of the story, giving the argument against racial discrimination and for self-determination for blacks on the one side, and the white fear of anarchy or communism and reluctance to give up their homeland on the other. But, while we must acknowledge the limitations of prime time, there are usually more than two sides to an argument and a more nuanced presentation, including some additional historical perspective and alternative points of view might have made the film even more effective.

I viewed the film with several family members and had a rousing discussion afterward that taught me more about both Rhodesian and family history. It's painful to acknowledge that one has benefited from an unjust and racist system, but white privilege in Rhodesia was an undisputed fact. It's especially hard to confront that reality when one is still dependent on that system and it seems normal or just irrevocable. Time and distance can bring perspective or they can just bury the truth under rationalizations and denial. Within my family there was probably a little bit of both, but at least among the members who saw the film, there seemed to be a sincere desire to acknowledge the injustices of the past.

Some facts presented in the film, such as the "Servants and Masters Act," were previously unknown as such to my family, but they concurred with the basic accuracy of the information presented. What was difficult for them was not so much the statistics of the situation, but the people. My father, who was quite liberal even as a youth, was dismayed that although he believed in justice for black Africans, and to some extent acted upon that belief, never simply sought out the opportunity to ask a black man how he felt, the way the filmmaker did. OK. Did he have regular contact with black Africans? Housing? Workplace?

From the point of view of my family, the major criticism of the film, however, was that although what was presented was true, it was not the whole truth. Of course there is probably no such thing as "the whole truth," and given the time limitations of the format it would only be possible to offer a slice of it if there were, but one goal of documentary filmmaking should be to give the viewer the most relevant facts in their proper context and a cross-section so representative that the end result feels like the whole truth.

My family did not feel that their friends and neighbors, their servants and themselves, were adequately represented. I asked Drasnin about the absence of these types of Rhodesians. He said that he had encountered politically moderate and less affluent Rhodesians, but that because they weren't major players, didn't warrant much of a mention, especially with such limited time. I acknowledge that reality, but would like to offer a view of the Rhodesian situation from their perspective because I believe that delving in to the psychology of the oppressor, especially the accidental oppressor, is essential if we are to learn from the tragic example of Rhodesia.

Although the disparity of wealth between white and black Rhodesians was stark, and must have been particularly salient to an American outsider, there were in fact considerable numbers of white members in the middle and even lower classes. My father and my aunt don't recall anyone in their town living in the kind of luxury presented as commonplace for white Rhodesians in the film. My grandfather was a vice-president at the Union Carbide chrome mine, where, as the film rightly noted, workers made 35 to 40 cents a day. But he himself made a better living here in America delivering newspapers than he had in Rhodesia and he was astounded by the standard of living achieved by our mineworker neighbors in Utah, which surpassed that of many executives in Rhodesia.

This is fascinating. How difficult would it have been for an outsider to discover this class of white Rhodesians?

My aunt spoke of her relationship with her maid, Martha, who was also a best friend. The film spoke of blacks always being outsiders within white society, but Martha really was a part of the family and a surrogate mother to the children. Martha was also doing quite well financially. She had a boyfriend who supported her, but my aunt was a struggling single mother. My aunt reports that more often than not she actually had to borrow money from Martha at the end of the month. While the mere fact that Martha was a maid and my aunt could employ one implies privilege for my aunt, and of course there was privilege, it was not that simple. Martha was not poor, my aunt was not rich, and most importantly they had a deep and genuine friendship. In reference to black Rhodesians, the narration in the film said, "almost anywhere he goes, he is an outsider." In my aunt's home and in many others, black people were most definitely insiders.

My aunt remembers working side by side with black workers in her clerical job, but the film shows only the "typical" employment picture of a white man supervising black laborers. She doesn't know if her co-workers earned the same wage that she did.

I don't question your assertion but I wonder how Martha would respond to your comments (or to the film!).

because people just didn't talk about those things. The film mentions skilled black workers making substantially less for the same work and I'm sure that was the case, but it was also the case that women made much less, just as it was and to some extent still is in the United States. That fact doesn't make racial discrimination right, but it does provide some context. Rhodesia was somewhat behind the times socially. And it wasn't so long ago that such wage disparities were accepted as a given here as well.

The one statement of the film that aroused the most refutation from the family was intended to illustrate the degree of wealth disparity. The narrator reports, "it is said that the per capita rate of swimming pools is said to be second only to Beverly Hills." The film doesn't say who it was that said this (I asked Drasnin and he couldn't remember, but said that it would certainly have been from some reputable source), but my family took great issue with the implication that whites were almost universally wealthy. My father and aunt claim to have known not a single family with a private pool. They feel that they and their lower-middle class peers were not accounted for in the film.

To his credit, Drasnin does mention that some blacks had beaten the odds, or rather the decks stacked against them, in order to climb up the socio-economic ladder. They are shown at their "club" golfing. But the larger point made is that despite the fact that strides had been, their golf course is almost ridiculously inferior. Although it's important to add the qualifier, to note that a little game of golf, a little economic improvement, doesn't make everything all right, it feels as if a chance to portray one of the shades of gray seems almost to have been squandered and all is reduced to black and white again.

There weren't enough shades of gray shown in the political sphere as well. The black people interviewed were universally angry, albeit rightfully so. The "happiest black faces on Earth" are nowhere to be seen, probably because they were a fiction introduced by the whites who wanted to believe in it. For a very long time, white people saw the black face they wanted to see, and black people put on the face that they thought would be pleasing to the whites and keep them out of trouble. However, they really did have a happier lot in Rhodesia than in most other African colonies, and particularly so when compared with South Africa. The film acknowledges the more subtle aspect of it, saying, "It may be discreet racism, but it's still racism." While that is true, and there is no such

thing as benign racism, and there is certainly no excuse for any variety, the differences of degree are important to note. They could mean the difference between life and death for many black people.

My uncle, who was extremely political and an activist for rights for blacks, reports that the Rhodesian variety of racism had a quality of gentility. He remembers a roughly 50/50 breakdown of white attitudes, blatantly racist, versus moderate to liberal. Rhodesia had made some important strides towards racial justice in the mid-fifties. Swimming pools, trains, and even the University of Rhodesia were integrated and plans to gradually give all citizens an equal vote were under way, but the white government was fearful of precipitous change. Many average citizens felt that the steps taken were too much, too soon, especially given the atmosphere of increasing fear. There was a backlash and the much more extreme Ian Smith was elected. Fear and racism prevailed, but the country was divided and there had been some major efforts taken towards equality, none of which are mentioned in the film. From the politically aware black perspective, those early efforts were felt to be too little, too late anyway. Although black Rhodesians may have been better off than black South Africans, those relative freedoms and comforts were no substitute for immediate, full enfranchisement.

As far as the white political perspective is concerned, the film seems to show two polarized viewpoints. Most whites portrayed are smugly prideful or their colonialist history and arrogantly protective of "their" property: "we worked for it, we're entitled to it" or patronizing of the blacks: "the more we educate these people, the more they want the power," "it's a paternalistic thing, which is a dirty word these days, but that is what they want." There are a few voices of white dissent, one liberal lawyer planning to leave who says, "by white rule they can maintain white privilege," and bishop supportive of black self-determination who ends up being arrested for failing to report "terrorist" activity. What is missing are the moderate voices, those who recognized the injustices of the system, but were unsure about how to go about fixing it, those who doubted their right to white privilege and questioned their right to the land, but couldn't afford to give it up or just leave. Rhodesia really was their home. They had built something there and were understandably reluctant to see all they had worked for evaporate.

Although perhaps to a lesser extent, our standard of living in the United States is dependent on the exploited labor of others as well. We wear cheaply manufactured clothing, and eat cheaply picked fresh produce. We become inured to these injustices. We tell ourselves that it's better than if they weren't employed at all, and perhaps that is true, but it is still unjust. The reasons for that complacency may be similar to those for the ambivalence of politically moderate white Africans. Of course preservation of self-interest is the obvious one, but there is also the factor of a sense of helplessness, that the problem is so deeply entrenched there is nothing we can do about it. In the case of Rhodesia, one crucial factor was the fear of what kinds of chaos and maybe even worse injustices might ensue in an unknown post-colonial government. Irv Drasnin acknowledges those fears when he says, "Their fight is no longer just for privilege, but for survival."

As it turns out, many of those fears were not unfounded. Perhaps precipitous change did ultimately lead to chaos. It was said that most blacks weren't politically sophisticated enough to effectively use their vote and elections were fraudulent. The whites used to say, "one man, one vote, once," and in the tragic case of Rhodesia, that appears to have been the case.

Robert Mugabe, who initially preached inclusion and reconciliation, has ended up presiding over a brutal dictatorship. Tribal conflicts that preceded colonialism have erupted again. Pre-colonial history tells us of Ndebele raids on the Shona. Now Mugabe, a Shona, has overseen the slaughter of an estimated 25,000 Ndebele. The economic deprivation and political oppression for the average black Zimbabwean is arguably much worse than it was under white rule. (For an excellent analysis of the deterioration in Zimbabwe, see *How to Kill a Country: Turning a breadbasket into a basket case in ten easy steps the Robert Mugabe Way*, by Samantha Power, The Atlantic, Dec. 2003)

Maybe they were better off under white rule, maybe they weren't. Perhaps the bleakness of the current situation is somewhat ameliorated by the fact that the oppressor is of the same color. Regardless, there is little here for white Rhodesians to feel vindicated about. The decline in Zimbabwe was not inevitable, as is shown by the early years under Mugabe, and despite protestations to the contrary, colonial intentions were

not altruistic. Claims of having made some things better in Africa would carry a lot more weight if there hadn't been so much profit made.

Nevertheless, it's important for middle-class, liberal accidental oppressors like my family to have us acknowledge that even though their ancestors perpetrated crimes against humanity, so did most of our ancestors. History is replete with stories of brutal conquest and even modern capitalism is all about the exploitation of weak workers for cheap labor. Ideally, we will all eventually wake up to the privilege we have at the expense of others and try to do something about it. It is not always pragmatic to attempt grand reversals and retributions. Just as it would be very difficult to figure out an equitable and practical way to distribute slavery reparations for black Americans, so it would have been nearly impossible to gently spirit away all of the white Rhodesians who had been there for generations and simply put everything right. What we can do is make efforts towards political, economic, and social justice for all, regardless of history. Wholesale castigation of those who are benefiting from the status quo doesn't seem to be a very effective way of achieving this.

At the end of *Who's Got a Right to Rhodesia*, the narrator states that "negotiations are overpowered by history." That appears to have been too true. However, I like to think that had greed been put aside, and more moderate minds prevailed on both sides, a solution with less suffering may have been possible for Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

Mary Anna,
I expected a thoughtful and reasoned critique and you did not disappoint. Your personal reflections helped bring this film to life.
Do you have any sense of how the Rhodesian media covered this event? South African or British media? How does one frame a nation's history and its social/racial complexities in 50 minutes?

JR

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